

He is capable of a felicitous line like this :

“Welcome, ineffable grace of dying days.” *

Still again, of an image like this :

“He judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a helpless thing.” †

How could one surpass this? “The sun falling round a helpless thing.” There are still other lines having just that grace and perfection of form, of which he was ordinarily so careless. But I will not linger.

The central thought, the great unifying thought, of Whitman, is that of the significance, the worth, the sacredness, of individual existence. I know of few, if of any, who have expressed this thought with more power, more reality. He holds on to the substance of the Christian tradition in this respect. Men are not lost in masses—classes, races, or humanity—to his mind. The individual man, the single, separate human soul, stands always foremost before him. It is as when Emerson says, “Souls are not saved in bundles.” They are not saved in bundles, and they do not exist in bundles. Every one feels, however closely he may be associated with others, and however blessed may be the association, that he is himself, and, in a sense, no one else knows him, and no one else can take the place of him.

“No one can acquire for another—not one,
No one can grow for another—not one.” ‡

—this is Whitman’s refrain. With this thought ever before him he declares that nothing is good to him that ignores individuals.§ We are apt to think that the indi-

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 72.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 269.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

vidual does not count for much, that the species, the race, is all. We say in these days, and try to find comfort in it, "The individual dies, but the race lives on." But that is just the opposite of Whitman's thought. Each and every one counts, and neither in time nor eternity can any one take the place of another. "Each who passes is considered," he declares, and "the young man who died and was buried," "the young woman who died and was put at his side," "the little child that peeped in at the door and then drew back and was never seen again," "the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with bitterness worse than gall"—all, all count.* It is this thought that breeds in him a universal human respect and a universal human affection. As he sits alone, yearning and thoughtful, it comes to him that there are other men in other lands, yearning and thoughtful,

"It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany,
Italy, France, Spain,
Or far, far, away, in China, or in Russia or Japan, talking other
dialects,
And it seems to me if I could know those men I should become
attached to them as I do to men in my own lands,
O I know we should be brethren and lovers,
I know I should be happy with them."†

It is this same thought that leads him (as if to test it and make sure it was real) into those catalogues of all sorts and conditions of men, that to some are so wearisome or else repulsive. For how easy it is for us to say "all men are our brothers," or "all are the children of God;" but how difficult to say, This felon on trial in

* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 70.

† *Ibid.*, p. 106.

trial in court is our brother, or this bedraggled woman, or that far-away savage, that Hottentot with clicking palate, that dwarfed Kamtschatkan, that Austral negro, naked, red, sooty, with protrusive lip, grovelling, seeking his food, that haggard, uncouth, untutored Bedowee, that benighted roamer of Amazonia, that Patagonian, that Feejeeman! * Yet this is what Whitman says, and these lists, these individualized portraits, are eloquent to those who see the thought, the impulse that led to their creation. Yes, with a touch of humor that is rare in him (I sometimes ask myself, Was there any humor in Whitman? †—he is generally so deadily in earnest)—of humor, if it be such, that at once passes into the profoundest gravity, he says, after confessing he belongs to his city and feels the significance of whatever he sees there :

“ The little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tail'd coats,

I am aware who they are (they are positively not worms or fleas),
I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is deathless with me,

What I do and say the same waits for them,

Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.” ‡

* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, pp. 119–120.

† So G. Sarrazin. “ Whitman differs from Richter by a total lack of humor. (*In Re: Walt Whitman*, p. 161.) But cf. T. B. Harned: “ Many Sunday evenings I called on my way to church, and he always enjoyed telling me with fine irony (for he was full of quiet humor): ‘ Well, Tom, you know my philosophy includes them all—even the Unitarians!’ ” (*In Re: Walt Whitman*, p. 356.)

‡ *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 68.

In a similar spirit:

“ The interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked are not nothing,
The barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing,
The perpetual successions of shallow people are not nothing as they go.”

—*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 336.

It is evident that all this presupposes a peculiar and distinct view of human nature. It is customary now (perhaps it has always been so, but it seems to be particularly the case since the advent of modern science) to contrast the littleness of men with the greatness of nature. The world about us is undoubtedly bigger than we—if by we is meant our body. And if we have simply these outward material standards of measurement, it does become somewhat absurd to make so much account of man. But Whitman proposed other standards of measurement. How much of a philosopher Whitman was, I do not know—certainly there is no philosophy (no reasoned thought, that is,) in his poems, nor would it be in place there. But this one may say—that some of the ripest results of philosophical analysis and reflection are to be found here and there in his pages, though they appear as feelings, presentiments, intuitions, rather than as reasoned products. Whitman is aware of the difference between personality and all other things. He pictures himself not overawed by nature, but standing at ease before her,

“—aplomb in the midst of irrational things.” *

“I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,” † he boldly declares. He is not contained, he assures us with absolute simplicity, between his hat and his boots. ‡ This idea that there is more to man than what is seen, or that, as Tennyson puts it, man is not what he sees and other than the things he touches—this idea of a mysterious somewhat beyond the body or anything that can be measured or laid hold of—this is real and living in all

* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 16.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.

that Whitman writes. This inner life it is that makes the real greatness of man. It is that immediately known to man, and yet it is in a sense unknown—yes, far more unknown than known; it stretches out beyond the consciousness of any moment, or perhaps of all the moments of our life.

“Why even I myself, I often think, know little or nothing of my real life,

Only a few hints, a few diffused faint clews and indirections.*

And again he declares, “the real me stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,”† notwithstanding all his “arrogant poems.” Yes, this wealth of inner being which is other than suns and stars and greater than they, and the consciousness of which Whitman sublimely says should make our souls stand composed and cool before a million universes‡—this it is in which and to which the glory of the world itself appears. “The atmosphere,” he says (and Berkley could not have said it better), “is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless. It is for my mouth forever.” § The pageant of nature, of earth and air and sky, is, he feels, a pageant for man; it is in his eyes and in his heart; he contains it as truly as it contains him—so that if you leave him out of account it is impossible to say what it is,

“May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills,
shining and flowing waters,

The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms,
May-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions,
And the real something has yet to be known,” ||

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 202.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 14.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 322; cf., “That immortal house more than all the fows of buildings ever built.” (“The City Dead House,” p. 285.)

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 29.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 101.

—which amounts to saying that perhaps *all* things have an inner side just as man has, and that we make a huge mistake if we judge of anything—even what we call inanimate nature—by the outside alone. Of man himself, he declares once with remarkable penetration, that it is not his material eyes that finally see, nor is it his “material body which finally loves, walks, laughs, shouts, embraces, procreates.”* The central energy, the undiscovered life, the fathomless depths behind all that appears—that is the true man, according to Walt Whitman; and hence man’s peculiar and unique place in what we call the universe, hence his transcendent, and, as Whitman believed, imperishable worth.

And whether we can follow all this, or are content to rest our thought of the worth of man on a basis of instinct and sympathy alone, few will question that man is the highest form of existence that we know.

“A ruddy drop of manly blood
The surging sea outweighs.”

To these lines of Emerson we all instinctively assent, nor is there anything in nature that does not stand lower in our estimation, and that we will not sacrifice, use up, for the sake of keeping a man alive. It is the old thought, “Ye are of more value than many sparrows.” Who ever did anything great for man who did not have a great thought of man—whether he could formulate the reasons for it or no?

But such being the greatness of man in Whitman’s estimation, everything connected with him has a ray of sacred significance. The body does not exhaust him, but it is a part of him, an expression of him in this life

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 146.

of his on the earth—and it, too, is sacred. It is a false spiritualism that is ashamed of the body, or of any part of it. There may be sayings of Whitman that rightfully offend, but there are other sayings that offend only because we ourselves are not pure and clean. They offend the prurient, but not the chaste and the holy. In the legend of our first parents we read that it was not till they had sinned that they were ashamed. When Whitman says,

“Welcome is every organ and attitude of me, and of any man
hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile,”

and goes on with his wonderful description of details, this may be bold, but it is not bad—and it ought not to be bold to those who are innocent and blameless in thought and life. There is, of course, a time and place for everything, there are things we do not speak of to every one, there are privacies between two, there may be things better felt, experienced, done, than talked about at all (if speech is golden, silence may be golden, too); but that there is anything unclean in distinctive manhood and womanhood; that there is anything low, vulgar, or obscene in fatherhood any more than motherhood; that there is anything in begetting more than in being begotten, over which we must cry “Hush,” because it is something wrong and forbidden; that, in short, Whitman, if he erred, erred in more than a question of taste; that he violated any moral principle—this is a monstrous and indeed a blasphemous assertion, since it condemns the very order of nature amid which and by which we live, and, if there be an Author of this order, condemns the Supreme Orderer, too. Said an honored minister of a

Christian communion recently, "Were we decently taught and weeded of a little of our pruriency—which is at the antipodes of purity—we should find Walt Whitman as clean as is the Creator." * This may be too absolute a claim, but with regard to the poems I have now in mind, it seems to me exact truth.

No, we must get a new seriousness about the body, a fresh sense of its part in our life, of its intimate connections with the spiritual part of us. It is by this that we "spirits veiled in flesh" communicate with one another in this world, it is by its energies that we continue the successive generations of men on the earth, it is through these despised avenues of sense that we take the sustenance that keeps us alive and eat the bread of God—and perhaps not in surface appearance, but in its interior meaning, it is ourselves, permanent, as Whitman thought, while what is excrementitious about it passes away, † all that happens to it leaving its traces, perhaps its scars, on its inner undying part. It may be a solemn thing, how we use or misuse our body. Whitman thought so. "Have you seen (he says) the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?"

For they do not conceal themselves and cannot conceal themselves." ‡

Who that has had the bitter experience of shattered nerves and exhausted vitality that sometimes comes to so-called intellectual men and women but will own that Whitman's language is no exaggeration, "All comes by

* Rev. M. J. Savage in *Arena*, Sept., 1894, p. 450.

† *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 147; cf., pp. 344, 25.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 86.

the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe." * Who that would be a leader of men but knows the truth of the words addressed "To a pupil :"

"You! do you not see how it would serve to have eyes, blood, complexion, clean and sweet?

Do you not see how it would serve to have such a body and soul that when you enter the crowd an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you?" †

For my part, I find it difficult to dissent from a word that Whitman says about the body.

And woman. Whitman's great doctrine of individuality includes her, too. She is not an appendage, a tool for man, but his equal. She has high ends of being as well as he. With characteristic simplicity and plainness of speech he announces,

"I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men." ‡

He is not afraid to contemplate the enlargement of the sphere of woman. § He pictures the great individuals of the future training themselves "to go in public to become orators and oratoresses." || He does not fear that the larger life of citizenship will contaminate and degrade woman; the great city to him is one

"Where women walk in public processions in the streets the same as the men,
Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men." ¶

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 265.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 302.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 45.

§ See the successive portraits of women in "Democratic Vistas," *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. II, p. 235.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 365.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 153.

"Her shape arises," he declares in the wonderful "Song of the Broad-Axe,"

"She less guarded than ever, yet more guarded than ever,
The gross and soil'd she moves among do not make her gross
and soil'd." *

And yet he never forgets the distinctive "womanhood" of woman, nor fails to celebrate her in her peculiar offices of wife and mother. He has his recognition of "womanly housework," † he celebrates "the oath of the inseparableness of two together" ‡ and "prophetic joys of better, loftier love's ideals, the divine wife, the sweet, eternal, perfect comrade." § I do not know what Whitman's private views were and some have doubted whether he believed in marriage, but I see nothing in his poems inconsistent with a recognition of a lifelong union of one man to one woman as the normal relation of the sexes. He speaks with honor of "the chaste husband" and "the chaste wife," || and if he refers to "the adulterous wish," ¶ "the treacherous seducer of young women," ** or "the adulterous unwholesome couple," †† it is plainly with the same feelings that we all have. And of motherhood no one has written with more feeling or a profounder appreciation.

"O the mother's joys! (he sings)

The watching, the endurance, the precious love, the anguish, the
patiently yielded life." ‡‡

Let any one read his lines in memory of his own mother §§

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 157.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 335.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 80.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 147.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 156.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 132.

** *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 15.

†† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 156.

‡‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 143.

§§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 376; cf., Vol. II, p. 282, note.

or that almost stately picture, recalling a woman of the old style, of "the justified mother of men," * and he will not doubt Whitman's sensibility in this direction. This man felt the mystery of birth and the potent spiritual influence of woman, and he celebrates both with holy reverence.

"Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes unfolded,
and is always to come unfolded,

Unfolded only out of the perfect body of a woman can a man be
formed of perfect body,

Unfolded out of the justice of the woman all justice is unfolded,
Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy;
A man is a great thing upon the earth and through eternity, but
every jot of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman;
First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in
himself." †

As Whitman teaches the dignity of the body and the dignity of woman, so does he teach the dignity of labor. He is a voice of the larger conscience of to-day, and sings things that were not sung before. Who has thought before of putting the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the shoemaker into song—or, if he has, has thought of treating them not as humble folk, picturesque in their poverty and struggles, but as his equals, his comrades, his fellow-laborers in the world? Where is the great-souled democrat in poetry? Not, so far as I know, before Whitman. Some may have struck the note, but here is the full-orb'd chorus of the song. Others had the idea of equality, and perhaps heroically acted on it in relation to the slave (as Lowell and Whittier), but here it is a

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 355.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 302-3.

palpitating reality for every day. How lovingly Whitman sings the common occupations of men? House-building, blacksmithing, nail-making, ship-joining, dock-building, fish-curing, stone-cutting, boiler-making, rope-twisting—all these and a hundred others appear in his lines* as if to show that not one honest work of man's hand was forgotten by him or left out of account. With delightful abandon he tells us,

"I am enamoured of growing out-doors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or wood,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and
mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out." †

What a picture of the harvest field—

"Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty
angels with shirts bagg'd out at their waists." ‡

"To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade" §—this line of Whitman's represents one of the heights of his ambition; yes, he would have every man see that he really does something; every woman, too. And then what a lift he gives us in his view of labor! He sees that, sordid and commonplace as it may seem, it is kindred to the forces of the universe.

"Ah little reck's the laborer,
How near his work is holding him to God,
The loving Laborer through space and time." ||

Who more a child of the Divine, one might say, indeed, than he who reproduces the old miracle and gives form to the formless, and arranges, combines, separates, and makes serviceable things for the uses of man?

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, pp. 173-4-5.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 39.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 67. § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 162.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 157.

The great idea of individuality, when it takes political form, becomes democracy. It means the abolition of classes, the end of obsequiousness, self-respect. The very essence of it Whitman sums up in his "Song of Joy," when he says,

"O the joy of a manly self-hood !

To be servile to none, to defer to none, not to any tyrant known
or unknown,

To confront with your personality all the other personalities of the
earth." *

A proud, virile spirit runs through all this man's writings. His word to Americans is "*Resist much, obey little.*"† He extols "the latent right of insurrection."‡ He admires "the audacity and sublime turbulence of the states."§ He says, "Let others praise eminent men and hold up peace, I hold up agitation and conflict."|| Sometimes he comes near the line of bumptiousness, and yet it is never that. There is a deep, sublime motive underlying all he says; and this is, that we are not made for institutions, laws, good usages and the like—but they are ever and forever made for us, and we must forever see to it that they serve us. We must look into what is called good, and see that it is good, we must look into what is called justice, and see that it is justice, we must look into law throned on high, and see that it is worthy to be placed there. Once people become obedient in the old unthinking sense, submissive, imagining that the laws come from some wisdom superior to their own, and there

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 146.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 15; cf. Emerson in "Politics:" "Good men must not obey the laws too well."

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 17. § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 274. || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 189.

is an end of liberty, an end of human development, a beginning of decadence. Is the warning unnecessary for us? Does it apply only to the old world, where kings and privileged classes are still allowed—though hardly even there as in former times? Look at some of our great cities. What do the forms of democracy amount to, when they are dead forms, when men, true men, “men who their duties know, but know their rights as well,” are not on hand to animate them? Is it not tame, meek, submissive beyond pity or sympathy almost, when some of our cities allow themselves to be ruled as they are? Is not the spirit of revolt, of rebellion, the proud spirit that will not brook the disgraceful practices that are so common, the very spirit that we need? The same might be said of some of our Commonwealths. A few years ago, the then Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania used this language at a dinner of the New England Society in Philadelphia. (Allowance must, of course, be made for the fact that it was an after-dinner speech; but there was evidently seriousness in it as well.) “The history of Pennsylvania is soon told. It was founded by one William Penn, who was for a time its proprietary Governor. It is composed of iron and coal and railroads. The proprietors of this State to-day are J. Donald Cameron and Matthew Stanley Quay.”* Yet at this, too, we laugh and submit. Which is better—this, or the “turbulence,” the “insurrection,” of which Whitman speaks? To my mind, it is profoundly true, as Whitman says, that the great city is one

“Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons.” †

* Chief Justice Paxson, as quoted in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 23 Dec., '92.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 153.

Nothing else keeps the soul of a people alive. As Wendell Phillips used to say, "When there is peace at Warsaw, there is spiritual death." Whitman glories in our industrial age, and yet he never forgets that nothing—no inventions, no machinery, no spread of comfort, no perfection of material accomplishment of any kind—can take the place of self-respecting manhood in the individual citizen.* "Thee in thy moral wealth and civilization (until which thy proudest civilization must remain in vain)," † he says in apostrophizing America.

Yet with all said and done, what an affection this prophet of individual rights had for his country! His is not the rampant individualism that is merely self-centered and feels no ties with a larger whole.‡ The freedom he celebrates is not license§ nor does the insurrection he preaches the right of mean what that word commonly suggests to the mind. If there may be insurrection for *any* grievance, real or fancied, then had the South a right to secede from the Union, and it was criminal to put the Rebellion down. The answer to such logic on Whitman's part was his "Drum-Taps." What fiery energy breathes through them! And in almost his latest poem he says,

"I announce that the identity of these States is a single identity only,
I announce the Union more and more compact, indissoluble." ||

* "I swear I begin to see the meaning of these things." *Ibid.*, p. 273.

† *Ibid.*, p. 350.

‡ Cf. the broad and philosophic spirit of his words in "Democratic Vistas," *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 213, note, and p. 219.

§ "Democracy too is law, and of the strictest, amplest kind. Many suppose that it means a throwing aside of law and running riot." ("Democratic Vistas," *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 219 and p. 336.)

|| *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I., p. 381.

Addressing the Union in those magnificent lines, "The Song of the Exposition," he says,

"Without thee neither all nor each, nor land, home,
Nor ship, nor mine, nor any here this day secure.

Our farms, inventions, crops, we own in thee! cities and States in
thee!

Our freedom all in thee! our very lives in thee!"*

Undoubtedly there must be a spiritual as well as a physical bond, and Whitman most powerfully says this; undoubtedly mere constitutions or mere arms are unavailing—

"Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing will so cohere."

But that on occasions law may be used, and the unwilling, the rebellious, be compelled, he questions quite as little.† Whitman was indeed too great a man to be a radical merely any more than a conservative. The freedom in which he believed was, notwithstanding the seeming extravagance of some of his utterances, an august freedom. It was a freedom consistent with what he called "the immortal laws."‡ He sang of man "for freest action form'd under the laws divine."§ The modern political movement he interpreted as Freedom, with Law on one side and Peace on the other.|| In speaking of America he said:

"Lo, where arise three peerless stars
To be thy natal stars my country, Ensemble, Evolution, Freedom,
Set in the sky of Law."¶

It is this balance, this equipoise of mind, that makes

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 164-5. † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 247-269.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 14.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 9.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 370.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 350.

Whitman great and sane, and prevents his being claimed by the sectarian. He had his strong insinuations, yet he saw the place of other things as well.

As Whitman sets his face to the future, he has unmeasured hope. To him progress is a law of life. The race has gone so far, it will go farther. There is an atmosphere of divine cheer on his pages, the like of which I hardly know in any modern writer—or for that matter in any writer.

“In this broad earth of ours,
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
Nestles the seed perfection.

By every life a share or more or less,
None born but it is born, conceal'd or unconceal'd the seed is
waiting.”*

This is his deep, central thought. Man and all things are born with an impulse toward more than they are. You cannot label them and say, this much they are and nothing more will come of them. Give time—“the amplitude of Time,” to use one of Whitman's great phrases—and even the primitive nebula, mere mist and smoke, becomes what we see to-day. It is a mystic, not a mechanical world, in which we live. There are fires, energy, hidden away in nature, deep on deep, and no plummet can sound them, and no temporary achievement can exhaust them. It is a great, solemn, divine universe in which we live. Do we believe this, or, if we do, is it hearsay with us? Then let me say that here was a man, for whom the belief was a part of his flesh and blood. In an age of surface thinking and of surface

* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 181.

living, of scepticism and ennui, he stands forth as one of the great believers. Others rest on the past; he too rests on the past and does not disdain it, but he is ready to go beyond it. This fair universe is to him a procession.* Speaking of what the past has bequeathed to us, he says:

"I have pursued it, own it is admirable, (moving awhile among it,)

Think nothing can ever be greater, nothing can ever deserve more than it deserves,

Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it,
I stand in my place with my own day here."†

"Outlining what is yet to be"‡ is one of the great tasks to his mind. He addresses America, "Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood,"

"Belief I sing, and preparation;

As Life and Nature are not great with reference to the present only,
But greater still from what is yet to come,

Out of that formula for thee I sing."§

He sang our Civil War, and yet in the "Song of the Exposition" he says,

"Away with themes of war; away with war itself!"||

"Amelioration is one of the earth's words,"¶ he declares; and in "The Mystic Trumpeter" he dares to dream of "War, sorrow, suffering gone—the rank earth purged."**

And yet the progress Whitman celebrates is always in the last analysis the progress of souls. All he sings, he says, "has reference to the soul."†† He never loses

* *Complete Prose, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 85. † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 20.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 11. § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 347. || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 162.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 176. ** *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 358. †† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 15.

himself in material magnitudes, in general laws or abstractions. All is concrete, individual, and the progress is the progress of single, separate human souls.

"To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls," *

—such might be almost called an epitome of his philosophy. "I tramp a perpetual journey (he says in his homely, yet vivid manner),

"My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,

I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,

I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,

But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,

My left hand hooking you round the waist,

My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road."

And then,

"Not I, not any else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself." †

A loving, yet stern and salutary teacher! What more moving and solemn thought is there than that the universe is a scene wherein we are placed to grow, to unfold all the hidden possibilities of our nature, each for himself, each separately valuable, each separately accountable—yes, I add this, for though Whitman does not make much of it, he does not ignore it, and says something of America that he would doubtless say of each individual:

"If we are lost, no victor else has destroyed us,
It is by ourselves we go down to eternal night." ‡

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 127. † *Ibid*, Vol. I, p. 73.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 264.

And this law of progress, which is the law of life as we know it, is, to Whitman, the law of all life, the law of all the worlds.

“Gliding o’er all, through all,
Through Nature, Time, and Space,
As a ship on the waters advancing,
The voyage of the soul—not life alone,
Death, many deaths I’ll sing.”*

—this is his message.

“If I, you [he says] and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces, were this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail in the long run, We should surely bring up again where we now stand, And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther.” †

“There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage,” is his conclusion. Hence the death we dread so much may be different, to use his everyday language, “from what any one supposes and luckier” ‡—yes, to his mind, is so. The principle he applies to all the varied stages of life, “However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling, we cannot remain here,”—such words apply to the last stage as well, and to his rapt vision, we go, we go, he knows not where we go, but he knows we go toward the best—toward something great. § It is a sublime faith, one that nourishes, is good for the soul.

The climax of Whitman’s thought and of Whitman’s verse is, to my mind, reached in the “Passage to India.” It is not for every day, any more than other things he wrote are for everybody. It is rather a holy scripture

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 218.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 73.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 127.

of the new world, and should be read on stately occasions in church or cathedral. In it he rises to imaginative levels, the like of which do not exist out of the Bible or of Æschylus. After reading it I know why Whitman speaks of dropping "in the earth the germs of a greater religion" *—for this is religion, something that takes us into the realm of the vast and the infinite.

"Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth ;

Passage to more than India!

PAre thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?
Disportest thou on waters such as those?

Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!

Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!

You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never
reach'd you.

Passage to more than India!

O secret of the earth and sky!

O of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!

O of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my land!

O of you O prairies! of you gray rocks!

O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!

O day and night, passage to you!

* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 23.

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!

Passage to you! *

Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!

Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like
mere brutes?

Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long
enough?

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,

Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?

O farther, farther, farther sail!" †

* Cf., Socrates' picture of a possible paradise, as reported in the
"Phædo:" "The sun, the moon and the stars they see as they really
are; and are blessed in all other matters agreeably thereto."

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 322-323.

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